

The Popular and the Avant-garde: Performance, Incorporation and Resistance

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Since its inception, the word popular has been used to signal the ‘lower’ of society. From the thirteenth century, when it comes into the English language, to the present the term has been used to signify the common people, the violent masses, low or vulgar culture. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu acknowledges in his study *Distinction*, that the social category of the popular, associated with what he calls the ‘low’ gaze, has been constructed by the dominant classes ‘to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences’ (Bourdieu 1984, xxx).

After the onset of industrialisation and the formation of the working class in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the prejudices associated with the popular were transferred, largely, on to them. Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*, published in 1869, demonstrates this.

Every time that we snatch up a vehement opinion in ignorance and passion, every time that we long to crush an adversary by sheer violence,— he has found in his own bosom the eternal spirit of the [working class]. (Arnold 2009, 9)

Arnold’s principal concern in *Culture and Anarchy* is the preservation of high culture. The presence and power of the new working class suggested to Arnold that this was in danger of being lost, either because of a levelling down of culture so that the working classes could grasp it or through the imposition of a workers’ (i.e., ‘low’) culture from below.

Arnold was not alone in his fears of the working class’s newly found power. Many of the discourses around culture that emerged in the nineteenth century pitted the ‘barbaric’ and immoral popular culture (a term first used in 1854) of the workers against the ‘refined’ and moral high culture of the bourgeoisie. This saw many reject

outright anything produced by or for popular audiences as vile, rude or pedestrian. Others were less interested in discrediting the popular owing to its perceived sophistication, but because they took issue with its producers, the capitalist bourgeoisie.

While some modernist forms were hostile to mass and popular culture, others, especially avant-garde, tended to be more embracing of it. For Peter Bürger, this is what distinguishes the two. In *Theory of the Avant-Garde* he argues that modernists' insistence on the autonomy of their works from other cultural forms, like mass or popular culture, essentially perpetuated a bourgeois ideology of superiority. Consequently, he regards modernist art as 'the objectification of the self-understanding of the bourgeois class' (Bürger 1984, 47). Historical avant-garde practices, on the other hand, were more forthcoming about their connections to other cultural forms; they not only acknowledged mass and popular culture, but also openly co-opted and integrated it into their artworks. Bürger sees this not only as part of the avant-garde's resistance to modernism, but also as its 'attack on the status of art in bourgeois society' (1984, 49). Whereas modernists sought to position their artwork outside society to protect it, the avant-garde sought to eliminate the barrier between art and life and discredit the idea that art can somehow be set apart (or protected) from the conditions of the real world.

Two tensions appear to emerge from this. The first concerns modernism's focus on developing artistic works capable of representing the complexities of industrial society. While certain theatrical forms were rejected on the grounds that they were no longer relevant, we find many practitioners in the period turning to popular traditions of the past, like shadow theatre, folk songs, the *commedia dell'arte* or the circus in order to develop new theatrical styles and aesthetics that they felt were

better suited to discussing the contemporary moment better than others that were being used.

The second tension concerns folding the popular into new aesthetic modes creating what Eric Bulson has referred to as ‘resistance from within’ (Bulson 2013, 56). As well as critically engaging with artistic institutions of the past, artists challenged socially and culturally entrenched views regarding artistic status and sought to question the broader effects of industrialisation, notably the commodification of art and culture.

In this paper, I will demonstrate how popular forms of performance were used in three avant-garde moments – early cabaret, Futurism and Dada. Drawing on Bürger and Bulson’s ideas, I also consider how the appropriation of popular traditions may be interpreted as critical of the dominant economic, political and aesthetic systems in which they worked.

Early Cabaret

Rodolphe Salis opened the first recognised cabaret, Le Chat Noir, in an abandoned post-office in the Montmartre district of Paris in November of 1881. The Chat Noir was conceived of and designed as a *cabaret artistique*, a venue to accommodate artistic and intellectual activity. Even before it had opened, Salis had secured the support of Émile Goudeau (1849-1906), a well-known local poet and former president of a group known as the Hydropathes. Formed by Goudeau in 1878, the Hydropathes had prefigured the cabaret as an affiliation of artists, mostly poets, who met regularly in cafes to share and discuss their work and to amuse one another with silly songs and poems. While the scope and content of their work varied, much of it was in some way preoccupied with the tensions of modern Parisian urban life, such as the contrast

between the aesthetic and intellectual energy associated with the Bohemian artistic community and the poverty and suffering of the Parisian poor and working class.

While there were members of the group known for producing more serious work,ⁱ much of the Hydropathes' output was deliberately, and playfully, unconventional.

Sharing the Hydropathes' anti-Establishment views, as well as some of their members, was Jules Lévy's *The Incoherents*, which he formed in 1882. Many of the group's satirical, ironic and at times controversial works were presented at public exhibitions. Of these, Sapeck's *Le rire* (1887), a photo-relief of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* with a smoking pipe in her mouth, is one of the more well known.ⁱⁱ In Sapeck's work, the anti-establishment objectives of the *Incoherents* is made particularly clear through the comic defacing of a reproduction of a well-known classical painting.

Artists from both the Hydropathes and the *Incoherents* were, from the start of *Le Chat Noir*, the core clientele, although the club quickly drew other Parisian artists as well as curious members of the bourgeoisie. Early programmes tended to resemble those of Hydropathe meetings, and predominantly featured poetry recitations, readings and songs. The *Chat Noir* became especially well known for its *ombres chinoises* (Chinese shadows), or shadow shows. One evening, during *chanson* performances, the painter Henri Rivière dimmed the lights and, from behind a cloth stretched over the small proscenium on the *Chat Noir*'s puppet stage, manipulated a series of cardboard cut-outs in front of a light creating a series of silhouettes that coincided with the lyrics to the song (Houchen 2003, 182). The success of Rivière's performance led to further experimentation with the shadow form, which over time came to be increasingly sophisticated and technologically advanced.

The technological developments of the cabaret's shadow theatre in many ways

signalled the ultimate union of a folk performance form with the capabilities of modern, industrial society. Owing to its marginal status as non-serious popular culture, the shadow form was an ideal vehicle for offering a playful modernist critique of contemporary culture and bourgeois values. One of the most popular was Henry Somm's *The Elephant*. In it, an African man is seen pulling an elephant across a barren landscape. Once the elephant reaches the centre of the screen, it pauses, sits down and defecatesⁱⁱⁱ; it then resumes its journey and departs the screen. In the final images of the piece, a flower sprouts out of the elephant's waste and the lights dim (Segal 1987, 69). As well as prefiguring the later Dadaist motto 'Art is shit', *The Elephant* mischievously articulates the avant-garde belief in the possibilities and inherent tensions of the modern urban landscape: that beauty might be born from misery. And while it may have been regarded as controversial to some, the show became incredibly popular with audiences and was performed over four thousand times at the Chat Noir before its closure in 1897 (Cate 1996, 57).

Futurism and Dada

For Filippo Tomasso Marinetti, the Italian poet, literary agent, and public provocateur, the future of art rested not in traditions of the past but in the energy and technologies of the present. In addition to their numerous manifestoes, Marinetti and members of his circle also used the theatre to disseminate their ideas. Like many of his peers, Marinetti believed the mainstream theatre to be woefully inadequate for modern society. He called it 'a finicking, slow, analytic, and diluted theatre worthy [...] of the age of the oil lamp', and in keeping with Futurist ideology, he rejected the existing theatre and many of its forms and traditions (Marinetti 1971d, 116). He did, however, see tremendous potential in the variety theatre owing to, among other

things, its immediacy, its swiftness and its willingness to please. He was also attracted to its low-art status which would certainly contribute to its ability to provoke and shock traditionalists and high art connoisseurs. In terms of form, the variety theatre possessed what Marinetti referred to as the 'Futurist marvellous', which allowed it to present 'powerful caricatures', 'delicious, impalpable ironies', and 'the whole gamut of stupidity, doltishness, and absurdity [...] pushing the intelligence to the very border of madness' (ibid., 117).

Many of Marinetti's proposals for amending the variety theatre for Futurism were based on the element of surprise. This included defamiliarising its more well-known elements, such as dyeing the arms, legs and hair of the *chanteuses* strange colours, as well as disrupting their songs with revolutionary speeches. Further surprises might include tying the actors up in sacks or soaping the floorboards to make them slip and fall, which suggests something of an attempt at harnessing, or realising, slapstick violence. Surprises might also be found in the auditorium. The manifesto makes several suggestions as to how to surprise audiences: e.g., audience members could be playfully glued to their seats; multiple tickets for one seat could be sold, resulting in altercations between ticket holders; and seats might be sprinkled with dust to make patrons itch and sneeze. The anticipated outcome of these proposals was a high-energy spectacle of chaos and absurdity, for which the variety theatre, owing to its loose form, was an all-too-willing receptacle.

Dada was very much an extension of the ideas and aesthetic practices of the Futurists. Those involved with Dada shared a disdain for the bourgeoisie and the arts that reflected their values. This was compounded by the outbreak of the First World War which triggered intense anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist feelings amongst many people. If the Futurists saw war as hygienic – a necessary violence to cleanse

society – the Dadaists saw it as a signal of art's and society's moral failure. Their subsequent rejection of artistic conventions and traditions should be read not as a rejection of the past in order to foster new art for the industrial, modern present, as with the Futurists, but a politically motivated refusal to legitimate these failures in any form.

While there were Dada-like stirrings as early as 1909, it is out of the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916 that a coherent movement emerges. For a period of five months starting in February 1916, the Cabaret Voltaire offered near-nightly^{iv} programmes consisting of an eclectic mix of material, including Futurist-inspired simultaneous recitations, sound poems, political *chanson*, puppet shows, African-inspired poems and dances, and many improvisational and spontaneous works.

There are several notable instances of popular appropriation in Dada worthy of discussion, but here I will focus on their use of folk forms. For Richard Huelsenbeck, Dada's call for 'purification' equated to a kind of re-setting of society that might be brought about through a return to primitive folk forms – or at least an idea of them. For him, primitivism was most clearly represented by African cultures, which can be seen in his experiments with black poetry, which he performed regularly at the Voltaire. Huelsenbeck is known to have performed his poems to African-inspired rhythms that he would beat out on a kettle-drum. Those looking for authenticity in Huelsenbeck's work would have been disappointed. Like other Dadaists, he was more interested in the idea of primitiveness, and in finding ways to map this into 'modern' visual languages, than authenticity per se. Ball's performance of 'gadji beri bimba', a sound poem delivered in the manner of a priestly Catholic chant, is indicative of this. In the performance, Ball recited the nonsensical poem based on imagined 'primitive sounds', dressed in the costume of a 'magical bishop' constructed out of coloured

carboard cyclinders. All elements of the work – the delivery, costume, and nonsensical language – ensure sense and meaning could not be easily located, and yet, inevitably, the work's conscious fusion of Western faith imagery (albeit abstracted) and stereotypical representations of primitive 'language' still somehow makes it familiar on some level.

The Dadaist's interest in folk can also be seen through their use of masks and movement. Yvette Hutchinson has suggested the mask in Dada performance had a couple of purposes, including 'to portray larger than life emotions, passions or characters, including the horror they perceived in a post-war society', as well as to 'mediate between the material and spiritual realms' (Hutchinson 1994, 51). Many of the mask designs reveal clear references to Cubism and Futurism, possessing highly abstracted, geometric qualities. And yet, to Ball the masks reminded him of the ancient Greek theatre (ibid., 353). Movement and gestural practices of the Dadaists tended to vary, from the highly expressive and mechanized, similar to the Futurists, to more freer, natural forms; the latter tended to characterize performances seeking to invoke folk primitiveness. The influence of Laban, who had opened his dance academy in Zurich in 1915, is unquestionable. It is known that Laban not only frequently attended the Cabaret Voltaire, but that some of his students also took part in many of the performances. One of the clearest instances of Dada's folk primitivism and Laban's training operating together was for an act choreographed by Ball and Sophie Taeuber, herself a Laban dancer, for an event at the Gallery Dada in April 1917. The act, entitled 'Negro Music and Dance', involved five of Laban's dancers in masks and long black caftans representing African women. The choreography was a mix of primitivism and Cubism, featuring both 'symmetrical movements and strongly emphasized rhythm' (Segal 1987, 360). This fusion of folk and modern aesthetics,

which Ball would refer to as a 'style', was designed to be disconcerting and ugly, which he thought necessary to 'free [us] from these times, even in the subconscious, and thus to give the times their innermost form' (quoted in Segal 1987, 360). For Ball, at least, an 'ugly' aesthetic was necessary for society to recognize its own ugliness (ibid.)

Like Futurism, part of the legacy of Dada can be found in its rejection of established arts methods and free-form scavaging from other cultural practices. They opened up performance, showing artists that it could be built out of ideas, concepts, and textual and visual fragments, as opposed to those more familiar elements, such as character and plot. What seems clear, however, is that popular performance forms were considered viable, useful sources for appropriation. Puppetry, *commedia dell'arte*, the *chanson*, variety theatre, and folk forms, whether real or imagined, were consistently appealed to owing to their low culture status, their inherent invitation for participation, and the vibrant aesthetic possibilities they provided. The incorporation of these forms was usually intended to be a radical gesture, but also a liberating one, helping to dismantle traditional cultural hierarchies and closing the gap between art and life. Borrowing the resources of the everyday, including popular culture, ensured that avant-garde art, as confused and untraditional as it may have been to some of its audiences, had some traces of a visual language that they recognised (even if to the elite, they recognised it as trash).

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ⁱ such as the sombre (and occasionally morbid) poetry and songs of Maurice Rollinat (1846-1903),

ⁱⁱ Not least of all for pre-dating Marcel Duchamp's controversial piece *LHOOQ* (1919), which also features a distressed *Mona Lisa*.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to Cate, Salis, who would sometimes narrate the performance, referred to the elephant's faeces as 'an odiferous pearl' (1996, 57).

^{iv} No performances were given on Fridays.